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ABSTRACT

A survey of colleagues in the communication discipline sought to assess the future of rhetoric and public address as an integral part of curriculum and degree programs. A trend that appeared in the remarks was that scholars in the field of rhetoric have too long eschewed the broadening of the concept of rhetorical criticism. Rhetoric should be considered inherent in all forms of human communication, not just public address. The respondents supported both rhetoric and public address as important parts of the communication discipline. New specialties, such as public relations and organizational communication, are tipping the balance of the communication curriculum away from the former central core of rhetoric and public address. However, rhetoric and public address are becoming contemporized and integrated into these new specialties. Communication administrators must take the lead in modernizing the study of rhetoric and public address and the new adaptations of rhetoric and public address must be included in the curriculum in order to attract bright students to the communication discipline. (SRT)

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RHETORIC AND PUBLIC ADDRESS:
A FUTURE IN THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE?

by

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RHETORIC AND PUBLIC ADDRESS: A FUTURE IN THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE?

Having witnessed the ferment in the communication discipline this past decade, I can easily understand the concerns expressed by my colleagues relative to the future of Rhetoric and Public Address as an integral part of our curriculum and degree programs. As a department chair, I have seen new and attractive specialties develop that have weaned students away from the former hard core of the discipline. Trank, Baker and Hall expressed this ferment when they posited that "The field of speech Communication has undergone considerable stress in the past decade or two as it accommodated to new areas of study, new modes of scholarship, the splitting up of areas and recombination into new configurations and, above all, unprecedented growth."[1] These authors further indicated that by far the largest number of departments included in their study operated under the rubric of "Communication Studies" or "Communication Arts" or "Communication Arts and Sciences" and were lodged in a "Liberal Arts" or an "Arts and Science" unit.[2]

In approaching this study, I decided to use input from eminent scholars and department chairs in our profession. These are the people who are in the trenches, facing the day to day strain of maintaining a viable curriculum in what is rapidly becoming, in some minds, a fragmented discipline. The response was outstanding and these people will be quoted throughout this essay. Following a discussion of their input and my own experience, I shall draw some conclusions relative to the thesis of this paper.

Bruce Gronbeck, Chair at the University of Iowa, in his response, stated that "First off, I suggest you separate 'rhetoric' and 'public address,' for they've had quite different fates over the last quarter century."[3] He makes

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a good case for this so I have taken his suggestion.

James C. McCroskey, Chair at West Virginia University, who believes that "the study of rhetoric is a vital and central element in our field," also recognizes that "This is an era of practicality in education. Organizational communication and PR are on the upswing because students believe they will be useful and will help them attain gainful employment, and they don't see R&PA in the same light. They are probably right in most instances." However, McCroskey further offers an explanation of this phenomenon by his statement that "What I think many students, as well as many of our colleagues, are missing is that rhetoric is the foundation of these presumably 'new' areas of emphasis."[4]

McCroskey's position is borne out if one studies some of the textbooks being used in these new specialties. Koehler, Anatol and Applbaum, in an organizational communication text, refer to such rhetorical items as "message strategies," "feedback and listening," and "clarity of messages."[5] In another organizational text, John E. Baird Jr. discusses "persuasive strategies" in "persuasive interviewing."[6] Myers and Myers, in their organizational text, unashamedly use the terms "ethos," "Pathos," and "logos" in a discussion of "Persuasion and Decision."[7]

If one studies the various public relations texts, the same results will be found. In perhaps the most popular PR text, Cutlip and Center devote a whole chapter to "Persuasion and Public Opinion" and formulate a list of principles of persuasion that could come out of any persuasion text.[8] Newsom and Scott discuss "Persuasion and People's Changing Attitudes" and "persuasion appeals" that, again would be very comfortable in a persuasion text.[9] Seitel asserts that "Communication can sometimes force receivers to

modify their points of view. A persuasive message can cause receivers to question their original thinking on an issue."[10] With messages that must be able to change attitudes being central to public relations, most PR texts are replete with rhetorical devices.

Robert L. Scott, Chair at the University of Minnesota, adds his support to those who believe that rhetoric is at the base of the new approaches to our discipline by asserting that

> I believe the burgeoning of other interests (things go well with Coke) involves communication. . . so the word "communication" gets hooked with others and heady interests seem swimmingly popular. But many interested in "medcomm" or "orgcomm" seem to be doing, and even quite consciously and conscientiously, "rhetorical studies." Rhetoric, also, is inspiring a good deal of "media criticism."[11]

Scott also calls to our attention the fact that "rhetoric is being rediscovered by others in academe. The literary critics and continental philosophers are doing more and more with rhetoric, not only unawares but also with awareness."[12]

Chairs are not without optimism. Bobby R. Patton, Chair at the University of Kansas thinks that

> . . . as many schools have gone "back to the basics," attention has been again focused upon the importance of rhetoric and public address. Our required fundamentals course at the University of Kansas continues to place emphasis upon competency in making speeches. I believe that this recognition of the importance of effective public speaking is widespread and will continue into our future.[13]

Another Chair who voices optimism, with rejoicing, about rhetoric is Cal Logue of the University of Georgia. Logue reports a new degree at Georgia

in this manner:

> I doubt if support for rhetoric has been stronger, in modern times than now. Thursday I sat in a meeting in which some twenty-seven department heads from Arts and Science were meeting. The Dean, under announcements, said proudly: "I am pleased to announce that the new Ph.D. in Rhetoric has been approved. At one time, rhetoric played a vital role in University curricula; I am happy to welcome it back." With that statement, my department launches a new Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Interpersonal Communication. (The Dean didn't mention the other "half" of our degree, feeling much more comfortable about the rhetoric part!)[14]

Logue supports Bob Scott's position that other fields of academe are learning the value of rhetoric. The Georgia Chair, in his response, recounted his experience, along with a coauthor, in submitting two proposed publications in the field of rhetoric to the Louisiana State University Press. In this case, the LSU Press hired, for each book manuscript, a historian with expertise in southern history to review the works and assess their value.[15]

Roderick Hart, former Chair at the University of Texas, also sees no reason to worry about rhetoric and public address. Hart says that

> To put the matter bluntly, I see no need to worry about rhetoric and public address. For the first time in the history of the field, our scholars are, on a regular basis, publishing booklength manuscripts with some of the premier university presses. This single development indicates that we are doing some of the best work we have ever done. In addition, our scholars are regularly participating in professional meetings hosted by political scientists, sociologists, and literary

scholars and, more importantly, holding our own during such encounters.[16]

Perhaps some of our problems in dealing with rhetoric on a contemporary basis is that we have taken too narrow of an approach to the concept. Maybe we felt that a rhetorical critical apparatus was fit only for the criticism of public address and that public address was fit only for the orators of the past. Ted Clevenger, Dean of the College of Communication at Florida State University, supports the growth of rhetorical theory through solving new critical problems

> We have rhetorical criticism of stage plays (Wayne Minnick), popular songs (Jimmy Rogers), electronic media (Martin Medhurst), comic strips (Greg Phifer), etc. And it is all coherent -- the principles of rhetorical criticism apply across all forms of human communication. For me, it follows that a field that defines itself as limited to a single form of communication, such as public speeches, risks an artifically narrow view.[17]

Gronbeck believes that the reassertion of rhetoric was due, partially, to such "outside" influences as the "social construction of reality" literature from Berger, Luckmann, and the sociologists as well as the work of the political symbolists such as Murray Edelmann, Doris Graber and Lance Bennett. He further believes that additional influence on rhetoric was exerted by the growing popularity of Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolution and some of the rising philosophical stars.[18]

If there is a trend that seems to run through the remarks of these scholars and chairs, it is that we in the rhetorical field have too long eschewed the broadening of the concept of rhetorical criticism. We should consider rhetoric as being inherent in all forms of human communication, not just public address.

Further, we should join our colleagues in other fields who are just now realizing that rhetorical theory transcends academic disciplines. As Gronbeck expresses this notion, "The whole damned world has discovered it's been rhetorical all along and didn't know it."[19]

Now, let us turn our thoughts to public address. Up front, I would like to recommend to you the two most comprehensive papers I have read on this subject and both were written by Bruce Gronbeck. One is entitled "The Birth, Death, and Rebirth of Public Address," delivered at the SCA Convention in Denver in 1985 and the other is "The Story of Twentieth-Century 'Public Address': A Tale of Professional Ideological Commitments," delivered at the 1986 RSA Conference held in Arlington, Texas.

Two of my respondents were by far the most bullish on public address. David Zarefsky, Associate Dean of the School of Speech at Northwestern University, was a bit surprised to learn that we were studying the future of rhetoric and public address in the communication discipline "because rhetoric and public address are flourishing here."[20] Zarefsky has good reason for this optimism.

> We have a large number of interested and talented students, a faculty large enough to permit offerings in depth, and classes that are bursting at the seams. I even have 75 students this quarter who <u>volunteered</u> for a course in which they will read Puritan sermons.[21]

Rhetoric and public address at Northwestern has been nourished over a fifty year period. As Zarefsky reports, "rhetoric and public address has been regarded as sound preparation for pre-law students, and we have had at least as many of those as we've had people interested in the business world".[22]

Clevenger wants to view public address as "the history of public speeches."[23] He further states that "Personally, I find the topic fascinating,

in much the same way that I am fascinated by military history."[24]

Logue offers the opinion that public address provides a challenge of its own. "Ironically, scholars in history, political science, and related fields -- outside of our own — recognize instantly the high value of rhetorical analyses of public discourse."[25] Here, Logue is viewing public discourse from a rhetorical viewpoint rather than Clevenger's historical perspective. However, there can be no doubt but what both support public address in the communication curriculum. As a matter of fact, the last manuscript submitted for publication by Logue and a manuscript on which he is now working are both centered on the speeches of famous Georgians.

As opposed to the more traditional concept of public address as espoused by Logue, Gronbeck sees the rebirth of public address in a new form, as if the study had gone through a metamorphosis. Again, Gronbeck credits outside influences for this resurrection. Referring to the rediscovery of public address in the 1980's, Gronbeck explains that

> For one thing, folks such as Anthony Giddens used the concept to refer to talk in "public space," to negotiations carried out. . . And he's important. For another, the neoMarxists started beating on the mechanical little critics who just described and interpreted; they called, instead, for critique--for stark looks at human implications, at the social-political dimensions of discourse. They found traditional, all-American criticism sterile. . . "Public address" is becoming, then, a positive concept again for those trying to understand "the public" philosophically and for those wishing to understand ideological suppression and hegemonic control of the masses by the elites. It's coming back, I emphasize, as quite a different concept

from what it was when you and I learned it.[26]

If you will permit me one slight variance from scholarly documentation, I would like to cite a telephone conversation I had with James McBath, former Chair of the University of Southern California. Jim had neglected to respond to my initial letter and he called with the following, somewhat philosophical support for public address:

> The function of public address study is to keep alive and usable the knowledge and ideas of the past. This is not because the past has said the last word but because it may have said it first. The facts, concepts and insights that are necessary for dealing with the problems of a complicated world can't be found in a nearby convenient place. The scholar must ransack other places and other times. The motive of public address study is to illumine the present and unlock the future.

It would seem that McBath is closer to the historical perspective as advocated by Clevenger.

A more pessimistic viewpoint is expressed by McCroskey.

> The area of public address, on the other hand, may be dying a deserved death. In an era of television, the study of great speakers who didn't even have a microphone is more than a little archaic. Public communication today is predominantly mediated communication. The ancients have little to say about what is going on now, with the possible exception of those who wrote about ethics.[27]

I would rather imagine that McCroskey would not object to the study of media communication, maybe even from a rhetorical viewpoint. In fact, in referring to media communication, he says that "these [courses dealing with

media communication] are the "new" public address courses. The people working with mediated persuasion are doing what public address scholars have failed to do, perform a successful marriage between art and science."[28]

The responses received in this study did not relate as much to public address per se as they did to rhetoric. However, most of the respondents supported public address as an important part of the communication discipline but some from different perspectives. Where does all this leave us, then, as to the future of rhetoric and public address in the communication departments throughout the nation?

In this paper, we have viewed the ideas and opinions of some of the top scholars and administrators in our profession. I suspect that I can conclude that all supported rhetoric and public address as a most important part of our communication curriculum. There was some disagreement as to the manner in which the courses are taught. However, I can say that, without the support of people such as I have cited, the future of any part of our discipline would look very dim.

Let me now refer to the problem area I enunciated at the beginning. The new specialties we are seeing introduced into the communication curriculum seem to be causing a tilt away from our former central core of rhetoric and public address. It has been witnessed by me at Miami (Ohio) University that, of more than 800 majors, almost 75% of them are in the public relations concentation or organizational communication concentration or are taking a degree in mass communication. On first glance, one would think that the death knell of rhetoric and public address had rung. However, as we witness the rhetorical perspectives in all of these comparatively new areas, we can conclude that rhetoric and public address is merely becoming contemporized, helping us to

analyze and better understand new forms of human communication. Our courses in Political and Legal Communication involve a type of public address that has been extant and highly important in our society for a number of years. However, these are comparatively new courses in our curriculum, which indicate that members of our profession have not been entirely asleep as the fermentation was taking place in the study of communication.

A caveat that should be given to communication administrators is that they must take the lead in modernizing the study of rhetoric and public address. This does not mean that Zarefsky must cease to study Puritan sermons or that Logue must put a stop to his study of Georgia political speakers. It does mean that we must include the new adaptations of rhetoric and public address in order to attract the bright new students to our major and to attract young scholars to the study of this concept. If rhetoric and public address dies as an integral part of our discipline, it will not be because we did something; it will be because we did nothing.

In new forms, I offer the prognosis that the future of rhetoric and public address will be bright with the new forms emerging for scholarly research and publication. The traditional approach will also remain as a legitimate critical apparatus for the gaining of knowledge concerning human communication. Gerald Miller, Chair at Michigan State, makes an eloquent statement concerning not only the survival of rhetoric and public address but the responsibility of communication scholars to see that it survives.

> As your question relates to areas such as organizational communication and public relations, I see rhetoric and public address contributing vitally in several realms, particularly in the realm of the <u>quality of our communication environment</u> and the <u>values</u> undergirding communi-

cation in these settings and for these purposes. Heaven only knows we are surely besieged daily with issues relating to the honesty and the credibility of messages emanating from these sectors. Most work in communication theory (what I might call scientific work) doesn't address these questions. It is communicatively non-judgmental and amoral. Who will address these important ethical issues if our discipline deserts them?[29]

ENDNOTES

[1]Douglas M. Trank, Samuel L. Becker, and Barbara Hall, "Communication Arts and Sciences in Transition," ACA Bulletin, 58 (1986), 8.

[2]Ibid, 9

[3]Letter received from Bruce Gronbeck, October 15, 1986

[4]Letter received from James C. McCroskey, September 18, 1986

[5]Jerry W. Koehler, Karl W. E. Anatol and Ronald L. Applbaum, Organizational Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976) 178ff

[6]John E. Baird Jr., The Dynamics of Organizational Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 151ff

[7]Michele Tolela Myers and Gail Myers, Managing by Communication (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), 274-75

[8]Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations, revised 5th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982) 111-35

[9]Doug Newsom and Alan Scott, This is PR/The Realities of Public Relations, 2nd ed., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981) 147-52

[10]Fraser P. Seitel, The Practice of Public Relations (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1980) 70

[11]Letter received from Robert L. Scott, September 17, 1986

[12]Ibid

[13]Letter from Bobby R. Patton, September 26, 1986

[14]Letter from Cal Logue, September 22, 1986

[15]Ibid

[16]Letter from Roderick Hart, September 29, 1986

[17]Letter from Ted Clevenger, September 23, 1986

[18]Gronbeck

[19]Ibid

[20]Letter from David Zarefsky, October 6, 1986

[21]Ibid

[22]Ibid

[23]Clevenger

[24]Ibid

[25]Logue

[26]Gronbeck

[27]McCroskey

[28]Ibid

[29]Letter from Gerald Miller, September 27, 1986